



Eco-tourism potential of Akhnoor town

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eco-tourism, heritage, biodiversity, cultural, nature, stupas

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ABSTRACT *Responsible travel that conserves the environment and sustains the well - being of local people. The eco-tourism mean tourism dedicated towards the ecology and environment of the area, which includes natural sites such as rivers, lakes, mountains, landscape, national park, wildlife sanctuaries, biosphere reserves and also places of cultural importance and heritage. In other words we can say that tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery, wild plants and animals, as well as the existing cultural aspects (both past and present), found in those areas. It is also known as natural tourism. In the present paper efforts has been made to highlights the major eco-tourism spots of Akhnoor town, which were studied during the environmental field visits conducted in the session 2012-2013, along with the students of B.SC -II. This visit was a part of educational curriculum.*



Panoramic view of Chenab



Ancient budhist site



Gurudwara



Coronation Of Maharaja Gulab Singh

Introduction

Travel and tourism are among the world's fastest growing industries and are the major source of foreign exchange earning for many developing countries. Ecotourism has attracted increasing attention in recent years.

Ecotourism defined differently by different organization for example according to international union of conservation of nature (IUCN) defines ecotourism as, "environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people".

India is multi-destination country with a variety of tourist attractions. Tourism is the second largest net foreign exchange earner for the country by the way of invisible exports- it create more jobs than any other sector for every rupee invested. It provides large scale employment opportunities. Keeping this in view it has been granted the status of an industry.

An optimum number of environment friendly visitor activities, which do not have any serious impact on the ecosystem and the local community and the positive involvement of the local community in maintaining the ecological balance are some of its key elements (UNWTO, 2002)

Study area and Methodology

Akhnoor town located along the right bank of river Chenab. Geographically it lies at latitude 32.87°N & 74.73°E and at an altitude of 301 meter (amsl). It is about 28 km away from the winter capital of the state i.e Jammu. Historically it is known as Viratnagar and is associated the epic of Mahabharata.

The present study is based upon the field visits which were conducted during the environmental field trip along with the students of B.Sc part II, as a part of their educational curriculum. The observations about the importance and the historical aspect of several tourist spots of Akhnoor town taken into consideration during the course of study. The details

about these spots collected from the both primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources include field visits, discussions with the locals, feedback from the students while secondary sources include reports from concerned Govt. offices, ASI (archaeological survey of India), JKTDC (Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Development Corporation), J & K Fisheries Department etc.

Results and Discussion

The detail of the various tourism spots of Akhnoor town are discussed as below:

1. River Chenab: In ancient time it was known by the name of Asikni river. The origin of river Chenab is traced to the lahul-spiti in Himachal Pradesh and it is one of the five rivers of Punjab where historians believed that Vedas were composed by the Aryans. During the holy month of Magh, the devotees take a holy dip in the river Chenab at the ghat to cleanse themselves of their sins. The holy dip taken before dawn under starlit sky is considered especially auspicious. Sankranti of every month of the Hindu calendar also witnesses huge rush at this ghat. Devotees especially women hailing from different parts of Jammu region congregate at the ghat. A majority of them instead of using the bridge cross the river from the left bank at Gurha Pattan to the right bank at Jia Pota by boats and vice versa. The boatmen locally called Mallah are offered, money, food grains, fruits and clothes. It is believed that such offering will please them and they would ensure safe and smooth passage through celestial rivers and oceans in the afterlife. To encourage religious and cultural tourism, the department of tourism has started organizing cultural events on Baisakhi and which now forms an important part of Jammu festival's itinerary.
2. Ancient Buddhist site: The site is spread in an area of about 500m in east west direction on the right bank of river Chenab (ancient Asikini or Chanderbhaga). The excavation carried out by the ASI (Archeological survey of India) Kashmir circle in 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 which revealed that it was only early Buddhist site in Jammu region on the basis of evidences such as terracotta heads with Buddhist monastic establishment. In addition to its small sized brunt bricks usually 36x38x7 cm, beads, gemstones, stone sculpture in Gupta style, copper coins of Kushan period are founded and opened a new chapter in the history and culture of the Jammu region. Most distinguished and significant Buddhist bricks structure spoked wheel stupa has been exposed during the scientific clearance work at this ancient site. The study of the site after excavation in 1999-2001 has revealed the sequence of four cultural periods. Period I suggesting a small Hamlet during second-first century BC when people used Grey Ware potteries. Period II being the most prolific period of building activity of Kushana period. First-third century AD, when the Stupa & Vihara were constructed. The well known Akhnoor terracotta Heads of the Ambaran are displayed in national/International museums. Period III representing Gupta age when the structure were strengthened & embellished at certain places with terracotta figures & decorations. Period IV belongs to Post Gupta time sixth-seventh century A.D. A reliquary casket was also found in the square stupa contains copper casket with in round silver casket and with in a Gold casket along with bones, ashes, semi-precious stones, Pearl beads, Silver and Gold etc., Most significant and distinguished Buddhist bricks structure spoked wheel Stupa has been exposed during the scientific clearance work at Ancient Buddhist site Ambaran, in the year 2008-10 which is discovered for the first time in the Northern part of India Sub-continent of Jammu and Kashmir state. The exposed Bricks structure is similar to famous excavated Stupa of Nagarjunakonda in Southern Indian and Sanghol in Punjab.
3. Jia Pota Ghat: Jia Pota Ghat is famous for the coro-

nation of first dogra ruler Maharaja Gulab Singh on 17th June 1822 by the Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Any old timer of Akhnoor will reveal that Jia Pota Ghat is one of many ghats situated on the right bank of Chenab. Interestingly the Jia Pota Ghat got its name from the Jia Pota tree whose botanical name is *Putranjiva roxburghii* of Euphorbiaceae family under whose shade the Raj Tilak ceremony of Maharaja Gulab Singh took place. The coronation at the ghat would always remain etched in the collective psyche of the people of this state and more particularly the Dogras as the first concrete step towards that the magnanimous Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, the most powerful king in the realm of Hindustan coronated Gulab Singh as Raja of Jammu region at Jia Pota in the backdrop of Akhnoor fort and lapped by the icy waves of Chenab. To commemorate the coronation day of Maharaja Gulab Singh, a commemorative tablet has been installed at the ghat depicting the scene of Raj Tilak. It is believed that original tree got uprooted and ultimately washed away in the floods of 1957. However solace can be sought in the fact that a few specimen of healthy Jia Pota trees are flourishing in the adjoining Jiya Pota Park.

4. Ancient fort: The ancient fort was built on site belonging to the Harappa civilization, along the fort there is two storied palace which was decorated arches and murals. The fort is situated on the right bank of River Chenab (Ancient name Asikni). The construction of the fort was started by Mian Tej Singh in 1762 A.D. and completely by his successor Raja Alum Singh in 1802 A.D. The fort has high fortification walls with bastions at regular intervals and is crowned with battlements. There are two-storied watch-towers at the corners which are also crowned by battlements and merlons. The fort has two parts which are bifurcated by a wall with a gate leading to the Palace located on the southern side. The palace is two storied and the walls facing the courtyard have decorated arches, some of which contains mural paintings. Access to the fort is obtained through both the river sides as well as the northern side. The large part of the fort was in ruins.
5. Pandava's gufa (cave): This town is believed to be Virat town of Mahabharat epic. This was the town where Pandavs had to hide themselves from Kauravs for one year. There is a cave temple on the banks of the river. The cave temple is named as Pandav Gufa. The entrance of the cave has the figures of Hanuman and Bhairav. The cave has the idol of Shiv Linga, which is believed to have been installed by Pandavs. The cave also images of all five Pandavs, their wife Draupati and Krishna with Arjun. The footprint of Lord Krishna is also found inside the temple. The idols of Dharmaraja and Chitrugupta are found near the Krishna foot print. The small cave temple also has the other shrines for Kali, Radha-Krishna and Shiva-Parvati-Ganesh. Pandava's stay during their exile period there.
6. Gurudwara: recently constructed Gurudwara Baba Sunder Singh ji Maharaj Tapoasthan along the river Chenab is another religious destination for tourists, especially Sikhs. On every Sunday, sikh sangat perform satsang. Followed by Langar.

Besides above mention spots, Akhnoor town is rich in sub-tropical floral biodiversity. Just 2 kilometer away Tanda park maintained by army is another place of attraction for nature lovers. The variety of wild animals, birds, rodents protected in captivity. Kameshwer temple is another place of tourist attraction needs to be developed.

Suggestion to develop Akhnoor town as ecotourism spot

Keeping in view the above mentioned spots, the ecotourism potential of Akhnoor town can be helpful in generating revenue for the state and improve the economy of the area. The various steps by which it can be developed are described as under:

1. Tourism map of the state: The famous tourism spots of the Akhnoor town needs to be displayed on the tourism

map of the state, with complete detail about their importance with respect to culture and history of the state.

2. Road connectivity: It is the prime necessity for the development of an area, by improving transport facilities tourism activity can be encouraged.
3. Infrastructure development: Infrastructure in terms of hotels, shops, parking, needs to be provided to the visitors.
4. Water sports: As river Chenab is perennial river and concept of water sports in terms of rafting, boating, swimming needs to be introduced in such a way that it will have least impact on the ecology of river Chenab.
5. Plantation: The plantation of local trees needs to be encouraged along the banks of river Chenab as it will have manifold benefits and at the same time impart beauty to the town.
6. Cremation ground needs to be properly maintained or relocation: presently there are cremation grounds just in front of Gurudwara in the open and there is need to shift these grounds to other place or should be enclosed within walls.
7. Installation of dustbins: In order to tackle the menace of

solid waste there is need for installation of dustbin at various spots for the collection solid waste at various tourist spots.

8. Awareness about eco-friendly life style: Tourists can be informed about eco friendly lifestyle through tourists guides, maps, hoarding, banners, pamphlets etc. for example ban on use of polythene bags.

Conclusion

Ecotourism is fast growing industry and the state of Jammu and Kashmir is endowed with rich cultural and biological diversity. Every year there is influx of tourists from India and abroad to the several pleasing location and there is need for promotion of eco tourism. It is possible only due to sincere efforts by the concerned institutions and public at large. Aknoor is a historic town and it has vast potential for ecotourism. By developing the tourist spots of the town, the economy as well as ecology of the town can be improved. At the same time it will helps to provide earning hand to local people also.

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